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HOW VULNERABLE IS THE KGB?

One swallow does not make a summer, and it is too early to read into the defection to the West of two high-ranking Soviet intelligence officers conclusive evidence of disintegrating morale within the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB), which serves the Kremlin as internal secret police and worldwide intelligence agency.

But top American intelligence officials who have talked at length to Vitaly Yurchenko, who defected recently to the United States, and to

Oleg Gordievsky, who defected in London, are inclined to believe that the KGB may in fact be in deep trouble with its brightest and most promising younger officers.

With a brilliant career culminating in his appointment as chief of the KGB residency in London, Mr. Gordievsky was one of the favorite sons of the Soviet state, enjoying all the special privileges and foreign travel that success within the Soviet intelligence hierarchy guarantees.

Similarly, Vitaly Yurchenko sought asylum in the United States this August, after serving from 1975 to 1980 as an intelligence operations officer in the Soviet Embassy in Washington and then rising to the exalted rank in Moscow of deputy chief of the North American department of the KGB's First Chief Directorate. This supervisory role gave him access to all secret Soviet intel-

ligence operations in the United States and Canada and made him as extraordinarily valuable to the United States as Mr. Gordievsky has been to the British.

The mystery as to why such successful Soviet intelligence officials should decide to risk the dangers of defection is deepened by the fact that a number of other up-and-coming KGB officers have recently broken with Moscow. Since they have required the security of complete anonymity, their names are not publicized, but their motives are well understood.

From a careful reading of the debriefing reports on all these recent defectors, American intelligence officials and National Security Council staffers are reaching similar conclusions.

First, there is near unanimity on the point that Marxism-Leninism as a system of belief has lost all credibility among the sophisticated and widely traveled officer corps of the KGB.

Bereft of the revolutionary faith that sustained their fathers, this new breed of KGB officer does not accept the Communist Party's dogmatic explanation of historical events. Mr. Gordievsky's disillusionment began, for example, with his personal rejection of the thesis that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was justified to save socialism.

Similarly, Mr. Yurchenko, during his 1975-80 service in the Soviet Embassy in Washington appears to have come to a clear preference for democratic institutions. He only delayed his defection in order to return to Moscow to take care of an ailing mother, whose eventual death permitted his escape to America.

There is a kind of rough justice here under which the Soviet leaders are paying for the horrors they have committed by losing some of the best and brightest of their younger career officers.

When asked whether General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's

ascension to power might not signal the coming of a new era that could attract and hold potential defectors within the KGB, both Mr. Gordievsky and Mr. Yurchenko are reported to have rejected this possibility. They see Mr. Gorbachev as marginally an improvement in dress and manners, but basically they are convinced he is a party functionary and representative in his views of what's wrong with the system.

During the 1930s and '40s, the magnetic pull of ideological attraction seemed to work in favor of the Soviets, as some highly placed British and Americans secretly volunteered their services to the Communist cause. Now the ideological tide seems to have turned. Low-ranking American and British traitors seem primarily motivated by money, while high-level KGB officers are attracted by the existence of free institutions.

As illustrated by the recent defection of the retired CIA officer, Edward Howard, who was identified as a Soviet source by Mr. Yurchenko, there is one development that could endanger the promising stream of recruitments and defections from KGB ranks. Reagan officials admit that for money and in apparent revenge for having been fired by the CIA, Mr. Howard passed to the KGB in Austria last year secret information that led to the death of a valuable agent in Moscow.

Fear of such betrayal can freeze potential KGB defectors in place, and the mistakes that were made in the recruitment, training, and attempted arrest of Mr. Howard by both the CIA and the FBI must not be repeated. Here is a case where the Senate and House intelligence committees can play a useful role in ensuring that prompt remedial action is taken, so that the rising tide of KGB defections can continue to flow toward the West.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.